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"A Glimpse of Sherman Fifty Years Ago."

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A GLIMPSE OF SHERMAN FIFTY YEARS AGO*

At the time of which I am writing—December 13th-15th, 1864—I was aide-de-camp to Major General Oliver O. Howard who commanded the Army of the Tennessee, the right wing of General Sherman's army, and also, I was serving as Assistant Adjutant General with the artillery of the army.

December 13th, 1864, I was ordered by General Howard to accompany General Hazen, who commanded the Second Division of the 15th Army Corps, in his advance upon Fort McAllister on the lower Ogeechee River, Hazen having recently rebuilt the bridge across the Ogeechee at Kings Mills.

The advance of the troops reached the neighborhood of Fort McAllister about 2 p. m. and General Hazen at once began his dispositions for an assault upon the fort.

He established a strong skirmish line which was pushed as close to the fort as possible, the men taking advantage of the configuration of the ground, of the trees, and the stumps and logs which covered the ground in front of the fort, to protect themselves from the fire of the enemy.

As his brigades came up, General Hazen put them in position for the attack, the movement of the troops being shielded from the observation of the enemy by a "dark fringe of woods that encompassed the fort."

General Sherman thus describes Fort McAllister in his Memoirs:

"The fort was an inclosed work, and its land front was in the nature of a bastion and curtains, with good parapet, ditch, *fraise* and *chevaux de fraise* made out of the large branches of live oaks. Luckily, the rebels had left the larger and unwieldy trunks on the ground, which served as a good

cover for the skirmish line, which crept behind these logs, and from them kept the artillerist from loading and firing their guns accurately."

General Hazen's plan of attack was by brigades in line of battle, the front of each brigade being determined by the apparent extent of the face of the fort immediately in its front and upon which it was to direct its attack, each brigade maintaining its own reserves.

It was slow work getting the troops in position for the assault because it was desirable that the battle line should be approached as near as possible to the fort without attracting the observation of the enemy, so as to shorten the distance over which the men would have to advance when the assault should be ordered.

During these movements of the troops General Hazen made no use of his guns, and I ventured to ask him if he did not intend to precede the assault by the fire of his artillery.

He replied, "No, I do not believe in advertising an assault by artillery fire."

I have frequently thought of this reply, and with, of course, the qualification of location and position, of its good judgment. Often artillery fire antecedent to an advance of infantry to the attack not only advertises such attack, but results in a waste of ammunition which later in the action could be used to much better advantage.

The assault was delivered about 5 o'clock p. m.

During the afternoon of December 13th General Sherman and General Howard were at Cheeves Mill on the left bank of the Ogeechee River, about three miles above Fort McAllister, and in plain view of the fort and of the assault which they observed with their field glasses, and which General Sherman describes as follows:

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"The sun was rapidly declining, and I was dreadfully impatient. * * * When the sun was about an hour high, another signal-message came from General Hazen that he was all ready, and I replied to go ahead. * * *

"Almost at that instant of time, we saw Hazen's troops come out of the dark fringe of woods that encompassed the fort, the lines dressed as on parade, with colors flying, and moving forward with a quick, steady pace. Fort McAllister was then all alive, its big guns belching forth dense clouds of smoke, which soon enveloped our assaulting lines. One color went down, but was up in a moment. As the lines advanced, faintly seen in the white, sulphurous smoke, there was a pause, a cessation of fire; smoke cleared away, and the parapets were blue with our men, who fired their muskets in the air, and shouted so that we actually heard them, or felt that we did."

"Fort McAllister was taken, and the good news was instantly sent by the signal officer (at Cheeves Mill) to our navy friends on the approaching gunboat, for a point of timber had shut out Fort McAllister from their view, and they had not seen the action at all, but must have heard the cannon-ading."

"The assault had been made by three parties in line, one from below, one from above the fort, and the third directly in rear, along the capital. All were simultaneous and had to pass a good abattis and line of torpedoes, which actually killed more of the assailants than the heavy guns of the fort, which generally overshot the mark. Hazen's entire loss was reported killed and wounded, ninety-two. Each party reached the parapet about the same time, and the garrison inside, of about two hundred and fifty men (about fifty of them killed or wounded), were in his power."

General Hazen's division was one of the veteran divisions of the army, and had been commanded by General Sherman at Shiloh and Vicksburg.

After the fort was taken, Generals Sherman and Howard came down the river to General Hazen's headquarters, and later in the evening they both dropped down the river to the U. S. man-of-war lying in the stream below Fort McAllister, thus opening communication with the fleet.

That night, under date of the "U. S. S. Dandelion, Ossabaw Sound, December 13, 1864, 11:50 p. m.," General Sherman reported to the Secretary of War the arrival of his army in front of Savannah.

He proceeded by water to Wassaw Sound, where he met Admiral Dahlgren, with whom and General Foster, he arranged for resupplying his army, General Foster agreeing to send him at once, at Cheeves Mill or King Bridge above Fort McAllister, six hundred thousand rations for the troops, and all the rifled guns of heavy caliber with ammunition which he had on hand, with which to bombard Savannah from positions already held by the army.

General Sherman says in his Memoirs, "Admiral Dahlgren then returned with me in the Harvest Moon to Fort McAllister. This consumed all of the 14th of December; and by the 15th I had again reached Cheeves Mill, where my horse awaited me, and I rode on to General Howard's headquarters at Anderson's plantation, on the plank road, about eight miles back of Savannah. I reached this place about noon, and immediately sent orders to my own headquarters on the Louisville Road, to have them brought over to the plank road, as a place more central and convenient; gave written notice to Generals Slocum and Howard of all the steps taken, and ordered them to get ready to receive siege guns, and put them

in position to bombard Savannah, and to prepare for the general assault." * * *

"Heavy details of men were at once put to work to prepare a wharf and depot at Kings Bridge, and the roads leading thereto were corduroyed in advance."

When General Sherman reached the headquarters of the Army of the Tennessee on December 15th, he asked for General Howard, and on learning that he was not at headquarters, but was with General Blair, and that he was not expected to return to his headquarters until the next day, General Sherman decided to spend the night at our headquarters, taking General Howard's tent.

There were but two tents at the headquarters of the Army of the Tennessee, one reserved for General Howard, and one the office tent of the Adjutant General. The officers of the staff were under "flies."

The tent of the General was in the center of the line of canvas, the flies being on either hand, the tent of the Adjutant General on one flank of the line.

The weather was delightful but cool, and after supper on the evening of December 15, 1864, the long line of camp-fires burned brightly, and the officers of the staff sat in front of them, chatting, until quite late in the evening, when one by one they dropped off to bed, General Sherman having early retired as he was wearied by the exertions of the past forty-eight hours.

Finally I found myself sitting alone at the camp-fire, thinking of various things, and of nothing in particular, but not sleepy enough to seek my cot, when I heard the approach of horses, and looking up saw two riders, one evidently an officer and the other his orderly.

The officer dismounted, and approaching me, said:

"I am Colonel Babcock, of General Grant's staff, and I have just arrived with dispatches for General Sherman. Is the General here?"

On learning of the General's presence, he said:

"Please inform him of my arrival."

I raised the flap of the tent, and going in awakened General Sherman with the information that Colonel Babcock had just arrived with dispatches from General Grant.

He exclaimed, "Get me a light. Show Babcock in."

I lighted a candle, and motioning to Colonel Babcock to enter the tent, resumed my seat before the camp-fire, with something fresh to think of.

How long I sat ruminating I cannot say, some time of course, because General Sherman had not only to read his dispatches but to learn from Babcock the situation of military affairs in Virginia, and in the great Military Division of the Mississippi, which was in his command.

Presently I saw the flap of the tent pushed aside, and General Sherman come out into the light of the camp-fire.

He was deep in thought, and utterly oblivious to his surroundings.

He had arisen from bed hurriedly on my announcing the arrival of Colonel Babcock, and had slipped on his coat.

In no other particular had he changed his dress.

He now stood before me without a hat, with his military coat buttoned loosely across his breast, in gray drawers and gray stockings without his boots.

He was utterly unconscious of physical comfort or discomfort, lost completely in the great thoughts which filled his mind.

He manifested occasionally, but in an entirely subconscious manner, a sensation of chill, because, although we were in the

South, in front of Savannah, there was a chill in the air of the December night, and the warmth of the camp-fire was agreeable.

He stood in the warm ashes, at times unconsciously brushing the ashes over one foot with the other, and he drew as close to the camp-fire as his subconsciousness deemed to be prudent, but with the exception of this automatic and purely physical impulse he was lost to every surrounding.

He was deep in thought.

Then I knew nothing of what he was thinking, as I sat and watched him, scarcely daring to move lest I should disturb his reverie by obtruding myself upon his consciousness.

Finally he turned and went into the tent to resume his conversation with Colonel Babcock.

And so the picture of the great soldier, which was indelibly stamped upon my memory, dissolved, and I found myself sitting alone before the camp-fire.

Fortunately we *now* know the thoughts that were in General Sherman's mind on the night of December 15, 1864, in front of Savannah. We have the record in General Grant's dispatches and in General Sherman's letters and memoirs.

Under date of Headquarters, Armies of the United States, City Point, Va., December 3, 1864, written before we had reached the seacoast, General Grant wrote to General Sherman: "In this letter I do not intend to give you anything like directions for future action, but will state a general idea I have, and will get your views after you have established yourself on the seacoast. With your veteran army I hope to get control of the only two through routes from East to West possessed by the enemy before the fall of Atlanta. The condition will be filled by holding Savannah and Branchville. If Wilmington falls, a force from there can cooperate with you."

"After all becomes quiet, and roads become so bad up here that there is likely to be a week or two when nothing can be done, I will run down the coast to see you. If you desire it, I will ask Mrs. Sherman to go with me."

Under date of Headquarters, Armies of the United States, City Point, Va., December 6, 1864 (three days later), General Grant wrote to General Sherman:

"On reflection, since sending my letter by the hands of Lieutenant Dunn, I have concluded that the most important operation towards closing out the rebellion will be to close out Lee and his army.

"You have now destroyed the roads of the South so that it will probably take them three months without interruption to reestablish a through line from East to West. In that time I think the job here will be effectually completed.

"My idea now is that you establish a base on the seacoast, fortify and leave in it all your artillery and cavalry, and enough infantry to protect them, and at the same time so threaten the interior that the militia of the South will have to be kept at home. *With the balance of your command come here by water with all dispatch.* Select yourself the officer to leave in command, but you I want in person. Unless you see objections to this plan which I cannot see, use every vessel going to you for purposes of transportation. * * *

"* * * Colonel Babcock (the bearer of this letter) will give you full information of all operations now in progress."

This was the dispatch which Colonel Babcock placed in General Sherman's hands the night of December 15, 1864.

It was of this plan to establish a fortified base on the coast in which to leave his cavalry and artillery, and with the infantry of his army to join General Grant, by sea, in front of Petersburg, that General Sherman was so intently thinking.

I am convinced that it was then as he stood in the warm ashes of our camp-fire, that the alternative plan of the South Carolina campaign crystallized itself in General Sherman's mind. The order to join General Grant in front of Petersburg with the infantry of his army acted as a mordant in fixing the color of his thought. Up to the moment of the reception of this order at the hands of Colonel Babcock, I can find no indication in the correspondence of Generals Grant and Sherman of a plan of campaign for the army after the capture of Savannah, beyond the very general idea that we were still to move "to the front," and seek the enemy. The first clearly defined outline of the campaign through the Carolinas which I have been able to discover, occurs in General Sherman's letter to General Grant dated December 16, 1864, written the day after he received the order to join him with the infantry of his army.

General Sherman was gifted with a warm imagination, and a virile and active mind. He saw clearly and distinctly, and his mind acted with marvelous rapidity. He was of a nervous temperament, always on the move: always full of thought: fertile in resources of thought: calling on his imagination for the answer to any problem of the moment: and always ready with a plan of action.

In his Memoirs, writing of the period of the opening of the campaign from Atlanta to the sea, General Sherman says:

"I had no purpose to march direct for Richmond by way of Augusta and Charlotte, but always designed to reach the seacoast first at Savannah or Port Royal, South Carolina, *and even kept in mind the alternative of Pensacola.*"

The letters from General Grant of December 3d and 6th, 1864, from which I have quoted, demonstrate that no idea of

the South Carolina campaign had been discussed between General Sherman and himself.

General Grant had undoubtedly his own ideas of the duty which Sherman's army should be called upon to perform, but knowing nothing of General Sherman's plans beyond the capture of Savannah, he concluded his letter of December 6th, 1864, as follows:

"Unless you see objections to this plan (to join General Grant with the infantry of the army) which I cannot see, use every vessel going to you for purposes of transportation."

During the march to the sea the horizon of thought broadened before Sherman. He foresaw the arrival of his army on the seacoast, and realized that the capture of Savannah was a mere incident, not the real object of his campaign. He abandoned the thought of Pensacola as a possible point on the seacoast at which he should establish communication with the fleet so soon as it became apparent that General Lee would not detach from the Army of Northern Virginia to meet him in Georgia.

I believe that General Sherman's mind was full of various plans of campaign, but that nothing definite had been determined even in his own mind beyond the capture of Savannah, until he received General Grant's order of December 6th, 1864, directing the embarkation of the infantry of his army and its transportation to Petersburg, Virginia, when a crisis of thought occurred.

Ready to obey General Grant's order, the thought, nevertheless, became instantly a fixed thought in his mind that the better plan would be to march through the Carolinas, via Columbia and Raleigh, facing meanwhile the contingency of a heavy concentration of the enemy in his front.

Well has Sherman said that he regards the South Carolina

campaign as his finest campaign. Strategically it was not only his finest campaign, but one of the finest of the war.

Consider for a moment the character and the problems of that campaign.

December 15, 1864, had just witnessed through the capture of Fort McAllister the establishment of communication with our fleet, and the establishment of a base of supplies on the lower Ogeechee, but Savannah had not then fallen.

It contemplated the fall of Savannah, a city easily defended, however, because it could be approached only over a few established roads leading into the city across the marshes, the balance of its periphery being rice fields under water and swamps, except toward the Savannah River, where there was a moderate front of dry land upon which regular approaches could be established, but equally a narrow front for defense.

Nor must it be forgotten that the enemy held interior lines of operations from Richmond to our front, along railways in working condition, and that, as General Sherman should advance into South Carolina northward, pushing the enemy before him, his heads of columns constantly under fire, he would be drawing nearer by every mile of his progress to that point at which, under every principle of the art of war, he might anticipate finding General Lee with the Army of Northern Virginia, or with a very considerable part of that army in reinforcement of the enemy whom he had been steadily pushing northward, ready for battle.

Of course this supposes that General Lee could have withdrawn from Richmond and Petersburg the whole or a very considerable part of his army, either without attracting General Grant's attention to such movement, or so have withdrawn as to have got the start of General Grant in any

movement that the Army of the Potomac might have attempted to make to interfere through battle with the withdrawal of the Army of Northern Virginia. As General Lee had, in the winter of 1864-1865, command of the railroads leading southwest from Richmond and Petersburg, and could have undoubtedly withdrawn his army had he cared to do so, this possibility of finding himself confronted by General Lee somewhere in the Carolinas General Sherman had to consider as a material part of his problem.

On the one hand was the order to prepare to join General Grant by water with the infantry of his army, on the other the preservation of his army intact for a long and uncertain campaign through the Carolinas, with the contingency which he had reason to believe was an almost military certainty, that before reaching a new base on the more northern Atlantic coast he might be forced to face General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, reinforced by the troops already in his front, in battle.

That he contemplated such a campaign, that he deliberately chose the more difficult and uncertain campaign, instead of falling in at once with General Grant's plan to join him in front of Petersburg with the infantry of the army, stamps General Sherman as a great soldier—certainly as one of the finest strategists of the war.

That General Lee did not concentrate in General Sherman's front in the Carolinas does not detract in the least from the consideration in which General Sherman's fame as a soldier should be held.

It was manifestly General Lee's move; the only move which offered the possibility of success to the cause of the South at that stage of the war. That General Lee did not avail himself of it, or at least did not make the attempt to avail

himself of it, is unaccountable as we study the situation fifty years after, having regard to his reputation as a soldier of genius and daring.

What would have been the result of General Sherman's campaign in the Carolinas had General Lee concentrated in his front it is unnecessary to consider. *He did not do so*, and the South Carolina campaign has passed into history as one of the great strategic campaigns of the war. And that it was largely contributive to the successful conclusion of the war is also a concession of history.

That General Sherman's mind was full of these great thoughts on the evening of December 15, 1864, is proven by his letter of December 16, 1864 (the next day's date), to General Grant, in which he acknowledges the receipt of his letter of December 6, 1864, and while undertaking to join him in front of Petersburg with from 50,000 to 60,000 infantry, outlines the thought in his mind which crystallized in the South Carolina campaign.

General Sherman says: "My four corps full of experience and full of ardor, coming to you en masse, equal to 60,000 fighting men, will be a reinforcement that Lee cannot disregard. Indeed with my present command, I had expected, after reducing Savannah, instantly to march to Columbia, South Carolina: thence to Raleigh, and thence to report to you. But this would consume, it may be, six weeks' time after the fall of Savannah, whereas by sea I can probably reach you with my men and arms before the middle of January."

But with General Grant's order of December 6, 1864, before him, General Sherman made every preparation to join General Grant by sea in front of Petersburg, directing the corduroying roads, building docks and arranging for the con-

centration of his artillery and transportation in a fortified camp near Fort McAllister, which was being studied under the direction of the Chief Engineer of the Army, Colonel Poe, meanwhile prosecuting the siege operations against Savannah.

The city, however, was evacuated by General Hardee on the night of December 20, 1864, and was entered by our troops on the morning of December 21, 1864.

Under date Headquarters, Armies of the United States, December 18, 1864, *before he had received General Sherman's letter of December 16, 1864*, General Grant wrote to General Sherman from Washington:

"I did think the best thing to do was to bring the greater part of your army here and wipe out Lee. The turn affairs now seem to be taking (General Thomas' victory at Nashville, Tennessee, December 15 and 16, 1864, and the destruction of General Hood's army), has shaken me in that opinion. I doubt whether you may not accomplish more toward that result *where you are* than if brought here, especially as I am informed since my arrival in the city, that it would take two months to get you here with all the other calls there are for ocean transportation.

"I want to get your views about what ought to be done and what can be done. If you capture the garrison of Savannah, it certainly will compel Lee to detach from Richmond, or give us nearly the whole South. My own opinion is that Lee is averse to going out of Virginia, and if the cause of the South is lost he wants Richmond to be the last place surrendered. If he has such views, it may be well to indulge him until we get everything else in our hands."

Here we have on the 18th of December, 1864, and before he had received General Sherman's letter of December 16th, a revocation by General Grant of his order of December 6th

to General Sherman to join him in front of Petersburg with the infantry of his army; and an invitation to General Sherman to submit his views as to the next move to be undertaken by his army.

Under date of December 24, 1864, General Sherman acknowledges the receipt of General Grant's dispatch of December 18, 1864, and says:

"I am pleased that you have modified your former orders."

"I feel no doubt whatever as to our future plans. I have thought them over so long and well that they appear as clear as daylight. I left Augusta untouched on purpose, because the enemy will be in doubt as to my objective point, after we cross the Savannah River, whether it be Augusta or Charleston, and will naturally divide his force. I will then move either on Branchville or Columbia by any curved line that gives us the best supplies, breaking up in our course as much railroad as possible: then ignoring Charleston and Augusta both, I would occupy Columbia and Camden, pausing there long enough to observe the effect. I would then strike for the Charleston and Wilmington Railroad somewhere between the Santee and Cape Fear River, and, if possible, communicate with the fleet under Admiral Dahlgren. * * * Charleston is now a mere desolated wreck, and is hardly worth the time it would take to starve it out. * * * But on the hypothesis of ignoring Charleston and taking Wilmington, I would then favor a movement direct on Raleigh. The game is then up with Lee unless he comes out of Richmond, avoids you and fights me, in which case I should reckon on your being on his heels. I feel confident that I can break up the whole railroad system of South Carolina and North Carolina, and be on the Roanoke either at Raleigh or Weldon by the time spring fairly opens, and if you feel confident that you

can whip Lee outside his intrenchments, I feel equally confident that I can handle him in the open country."

I think the glimpse of Sherman on the night of December 15, 1864, as he stood in the ashes of the camp-fire at the Headquarters of the Army of the Tennessee, just after receiving General Grant's order of December 6, 1864, to join him by sea in front of Petersburg with the infantry of the army, is worth preserving, as I believe that that order crystallized in Sherman's mind the idea of the South Carolina campaign, making it the dominant idea of his thoughts: a campaign, which for its strategy, ranks high in military history.

MAXWELL VAN ZANDT WOODHULL.